

Testimony for HB 1253

To: Representative Jim Kasper, Chair, and Members of the North Dakota House of Representatives Government and Veterans Affairs Committee, 67th North Dakota Legislative Session.

From: Zelda Gebhard, President and Legislative Liaison, North Dakota Association of the Blind (NDAB). Lobbyist 2020-2021 #1072
Home address: 8169 66th St SE, Edgeley, ND 58433.
H: (701) 493-2399; c: (701) 709-0262; Email: zelda@ndab.org

Re: Testimony offered for HB 1253, specifically for the need for accessible absentee voting.

Greetings Chairman Jim Kasper and members of the North Dakota House of Representatives Government and Veterans Affairs Committee.

I am testifying on behalf of myself as an individual who is legally blind and also as the president and volunteer lobbyist of the North Dakota Association of the Blind. We are a nonprofit membership organization. Our 250 members live in your neighborhoods and work in your communities.

We are neutral about HB 1253. I would like to speak specifically in regard to the portion that addresses the proposed changes to electronic delivery of an absentee ballot. Though the “absent” voter would be allowed to vote remotely on the device of their choosing, they would still be required to return the ballot via that instrument to the polling place to have their ballot marked and be casted in the “tabulation device” at the poll.

Individuals, such as I, who are blind or visually impaired are unable to drive to the polling place and in most communities in North Dakota there is no public transportation available. Transportation is the major barrier to us being able to vote and would remain so if these changes were approved because of the requirement to appear with our completed electronic ballot at the polling place.

We acknowledge the attempt that has been made to allow us greater accessibility to vote but do not feel this particular change in voting law would allow for any significant increase in accessibility.

We very much appreciate the availability of the ExpressVote in every polling place in ND. These accessible voting machines allow us to cast a secret ballot independently while at the polling place. Currently the only absentee voting allowed in ND is a paper ballot which I am sure all of you would agree, cannot be completed by someone with their eyes closed.

Therefore, I urge you to consider changes that would allow us to vote fully electronically in the secure and safe way that is currently an option for our military who reside out of state.

As you consider the many bills brought before you concerning voting in ND, I thank you for thoughtfully considering the needs and rights of all citizens of ND including those of with sight loss.

Thank you for your time.

*See also NDAB Resolution 2021-04 listed below:

NDAB Resolution 2021-04:

Equal Access to An Accessible Absentee Voting

WHEREAS, federal and state law requires equal access to the ballot and voting experience, including the right to a private and independent, verifiable accessible absentee ballot; and

WHEREAS, technology to make an absentee ballot accessible is available and represents an economical way to make the voting experience available to persons with disabilities, many of whom experience difficulties in traveling from their residences to designated polling sites; and

WHEREAS, the State of North Dakota has received federal monies to conduct its state elections, a small portion of which could be used to acquire statewide accessible technology to make the absentee ballot accessible to qualified voters;

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Board of the North Dakota Association of the Blind at its meeting on this Sunday, January 10, 2021, that:

1. Its members call upon the leaders and members of both houses of the North Dakota Legislature to recognize this protected right, consider and pass legislation if needed to make accessible absentee voting available to all qualified voters in North Dakota on an equal basis.
2. Respectfully urges the Governor of the State of North Dakota to sign any such legislation which meets the above goal; and
3. Strongly encourages responsible elements of State Government to certify one or more accessible absentee voting systems which meet the goal of this resolution and strive to make such system(s) available to qualified voters in North Dakota's 53 counties.